

Billy Pilgrim's Motion Sickness: Chronesthesia and Duration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

J.A. Martino

Billy Pilgrim is lost in thought. The neurotic anti-hero of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) travels regularly and unwittingly through time and space, rendering his situation in either dimension uncertain and precarious. This essay seeks to illustrate that rather than following a linear timeline, the sequence of events in the life of Billy Pilgrim is ordered by the power his memories have over his conscious awareness. When read in conjunction with Henri Bergson's distinction between spatial, external time, and heterogeneous, flowing, internal time, Billy's temporality undermines his conscious freedom. Bergson's depiction of freedom is reliant on the linear flow of time, which allows for continual creation and altering of the self, while internally all moments in an individual history are connected across the temporal flow. Unlike that of a psychologically healthy individual, Billy Pilgrim's involvement with memory is so compelling that his timeline ceases to be linear: the force of recollection is so strong that he believes himself to be physically travelling in time. Thus when he leaves his marital bed to go to the bathroom, "grope[s] for the light, realize[s] as he felt the rough walls that he had traveled back to 1944, to the prison hospital again,"¹ he believes that his body no longer exists in his apartment in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, but has moved to war-torn Germany. I posit that, in response to the horrors of his experience in the war, Billy's weakened mind creates a kind of temporality that denies the linear flow of time, its concomitant Bergsonian freedom, and the inevitability and irreversibility of death. The power of Billy's memories to affectively move him in space and in time is such that it overtakes his conscious thought: he is a captive of the shattered timeline of his own mind, and his physical location in space is subjugated to his mental location in time.

Slaughterhouse-Five, while undoubtedly an innovative and groundbreaking novel, exists within a tradition of American war novels which exhibit an affinity with French Existentialism. On the heels of World War I, an exceptionally bloody and often exceedingly futile engagement, many American writers began to explore the possibility of nothingness, of an empty universe bereft of design, as a response to the senselessness of warfare and the horrors they, like Billy, had witnessed. As Vance Ramsey notes: "where else to find the very quintessence of the absurd other than in a modern military establishment in the middle of a modern war?"² Juxtaposed against the earlier inter-war writers like Faulkner, Hemingway, and

Dos Passos, whose work had such impact on the French literary climate, novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Joseph Heller comprised the second wave of American philosophical novelists, influenced by the French writers who had absorbed and recreated the works of that earlier generation. Just as Sartre had hoped, his notions of absurdity and meaninglessness resonated with a new crop of writers. Lehan refers to the main character of Pynchon's *V.*, Benny Profane, as "the schlemiel as modern hero," and notes that underneath the meandering and absurd dual plotline "we see man becoming dehumanized, mere mechanical object."³ The main characters of novels like Pynchon's – *Slaughterhouse-Five* foremost among them – embody, in their absurdity, a sense of the emptiness of the world. Their lack of traditional heroism underlines the recession of belief in absolute values and universal meaning.

The decade in which Vonnegut was writing was an essentially existential one for many of the nation's youth: following the McCarthyist 1950s, a decade of extreme control and suspicion, Camusian notions of openness, his "communal sense of justice and a universal commitment to human value",⁴ and ideas of revolt and rebellion found a foothold in a culture that had already been producing works like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). The existential emphasis on the freedom to form one's own moral stance and the illegitimacy of external systems of control could hardly have found more fertile ground than that country in that decade. Camus and Sartre were immensely popular, with Camus's philosophical novel *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*, 1942) resonating particularly strongly with disillusioned American youth.

I establish the general existential climate of the time not to discuss the nothingness or absurdity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but to emphasise Bergson's relevance to the discussion. Twentieth-century existentialism could not have existed without Bergson's work, and though he fell out of academic favour long before these novels were written, his presence in the works is undeniable, if unrecognised. Patricia Johnson, for example, makes a strong case for Camus's conscious application of theories from Bergson's treatise on humour, *Laughter* (*Le rire*, 1912), in *The Outsider*, the tract which articulated and popularised the modern figure of the absurd man. Camus himself thought very highly of Bergson's philosophy, wrote essays on the value and import of Bergson's work, and has called his philosophy as "*la plus belle de toutes*" ("the loveliest of all").⁵ Certainly, in a more general sense, Camusian absurdity and Bergsonian humour rely on the same basic principles: a lack, a separation, between action and meaning, so that the expected outcome of a course of action is subverted. Camus describes the feeling of the absurd as the distance between man's desire for meaning and the absence of it

in the universe, the principle underpinning the Camusian anti-hero which so affected the literature of the American 1960s. Bernard-Henri Lévy calls Bergson a “bolt of lightning” that aimed to “liberate philosophy [and] . . . restore to it its sovereignty”; he even goes so far as to claim that “the century was Bergsonian.”⁶ His impact on French literature and philosophical thought was profound, and this Bergsonian climate was one that absorbed early American inter-war writers like Hemingway and Faulkner. Thus American literature was reflected in the work of French existential writers, whose novels were in turn read by a new generation of American writers, among them Vonnegut, who were alienated and prepared to believe in nothingness. And behind it all, Bergson.

Henri Bergson’s treatise on temporality and selfhood, *Time and Free Will (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience, 1889)*, centres around his attempts to define his theories of internal time, which he calls *duration (la durée)*.⁷ Put simply, Bergson’s notions of self and time are inextricably linked: for an animate being, there can be no consciousness without constant, unceasing change, and change is a temporal process. Each moment in time is a particular shade, a unique tone, which in passing is added to the construction of the self, and it is attached to the moment it was apprehended: “Duration and its contents are one and the same . . . because the feelings or sensations that occur in time carry the mark of their temporal moment.”⁸ To Bergson, this self is in a state of continuous flux, a swirl of feelings and states of being, each different from that which came before, which blend and bleed into one another. In the heterogeneity of consciousness, in the radical newness of duration, there is no obvious demarcation between where one state stops and another begins. Each new state of being is stained with those that came before and colours those that follow, and each is incorporated into duration as it passes. Thus, each moment affects both all the moments that came before it (as now, to recollect, I must look through the filter that is being continually added to the past) and all moments that succeed it (as my past now includes another state of being which will in turn exercise its own effect on the future and on the whole). The self, at any given moment, is comprised of each moment of its existence, and each new moment contributes to the building of the self.⁹ In *Creative Evolution (L’Evolution créatrice, 1907)* Bergson elaborates this point further by claiming that the past “in its entirety . . . follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present that is about to join it.”¹⁰ We carry the past around with us at all times, as it is preserved automatically through its passage into memory: duration is the immeasurable unfolding of conscious states in time.

Bergson’s conception of duration is subtle and complex, and as such my treatment of Bergsonian duration will focus on one definitive feature of the theory,

namely his situation of human freedom in the linear flow of temporality. Because, Bergson argues, human consciousness is located in the temporal flow, which enables the constant addition to character with every passing moment, there is more to the future self, the self that I will be an hour, or ten years, or five seconds from now, than just an accumulation of the past coiled behind me: there is room, in the linear flow of time, for the unforeseen. Consciousness in time is continual creation, so to accurately predict the future based on the past would be to create it before it is created: “an absurd hypothesis which is its own refutation.”¹¹ For Bergson, we are the artists of our own lives: there are no concrete choices, no divergent paths, there is only creation. He contends that this means we cannot reverse backwards through lived time in the way we can move a chair from one end of the room to another and back without altering the nature of the chair. A conscious being could not be moved from one moment in time to another because the self is changed with each moment. Because we exist in time, “we could not live over again a single moment, for we should have to begin by effacing the memory of all that had followed.”¹² These imperatives are important in a discussion of Billy Pilgrim’s time travel: if, as Bergson suggests, consciousness is defined by its existence in the linear flux of time and the persistence of memory, Billy Pilgrim’s temporality challenges the precise nature of his consciousness, and therefore his freedom.

Billy’s Location in Space

Twenty-five pages into *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at the end of a two-page chronological overview of Billy Pilgrim’s life, Tralfamadore is introduced. The appearance of Tralfamadore, so late in Billy’s life and seemingly out of nowhere, is generally regarded as Billy’s psychological break at the end of a long sweep of pain and tragedy that began with the war and which culminates here, in Ilium in early 1968, as he recovers from the plane crash in Vermont.¹³ Tralfamadore is closely connected to Billy’s time travel: both are arguably invented in the coma after the plane crash as a way to manage his fear and despair. While the novel is constructed in a way that makes it seem as though Billy has been travelling in time for years before he is abducted to Tralfamadore on the night of his daughter’s wedding, I will show in this section that Tralfamadore and the time travel are individual arms of the same mechanism: Tralfamadore, with its panoramic temporality, not only provides Billy with a place to which he can escape, it also justifies his time travel, thus enabling his escape into the durational sea.

Ihab Hassan has stated that the role of the absurd hero in a fundamentally existential work of fiction is to “create, like Sisyphus, meaning out of meaninglessness, being out of nothingness, dignity out of humiliation;” and he

claims that the question of freedom is, at its heart, one of creation, “in order to achieve identity or being in the void freedom creates.”¹⁴ Billy’s attempt to create meaning and dignity involves the construction of Tralfamadore out of scraps of his own memories.¹⁵ After the plane crash in Vermont, in which everyone on board but Billy is killed, Billy spends an undisclosed amount of time in a coma, during which his wife also dies. Once he finally recovers, and is allowed to go home, “he was quiet for a while . . . And then, without any warning, Billy went to New York City, and got on an all-night radio program devoted to talk. He told about having come unstuck in time. He said, too, that he had been kidnapped by a flying saucer in 1967.”¹⁶ It cannot be coincidental that Billy speaks of Tralfamadore only after the second most traumatizing event in his life, or that the Bergsonian links crop up most profusely in descriptions of Tralfamadore. Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl agree that: “Pilgrim may not be literally insane, but Vonnegut has undermined the reality of his experience on Tralfamadore. Indeed, the conclusion is irresistible that Pilgrim’s time and space travel are modes of escape.”¹⁷ Accepting that Billy’s time travel also begins from his coma, which I will discuss in the next section, and given the importance of Tralfamadore to Billy’s temporality, it is logical to conclude that Billy’s comatose mind creates the two phenomena in conjunction with one another as a means of escape. Certainly, it can be easily proven that Billy is not in his right mind, even aside from the hallucinatory strength of his flashbacks. His already weak mind is cracked in the war, as illustrated by this scene in which Billy watches a production of *Cinderella* in rhyming couplets, staged by the British prisoners-of-war in the camp: “Billy found the couplet so comical that he not only laughed – he shrieked. He went on shrieking until he was carried out of the shed and into another, where the hospital was.”¹⁸ From the moment Billy finds himself involved in the war, behind enemy lines, wading through snow, his sanity wears thin and transparent; indeed, Vonnegut seems to be implying that this is the only rational response to something as horrifying as a war. Billy is a portrait of a frightened, ill, maladjusted man, finished with the burden of living but afraid to die, and in need of escape.

Vonnegut provides structural evidence of the fantastic by planting recognizable themes and images from Billy’s Earth life throughout his chronicling of Tralfamadore and its civilization. Billy’s battered mind provides him with the materials to build a world: Vonnegut emphasises lexical connection and descriptive verisimilitude to describe Billy’s time travel, and the same repetition of phrases and scenes highlights the mnemonic source of Tralfamadore itself. In his 1974 article on the subject, Arnold Edelstein asserts that the seed of Billy’s experience on Tralfamadore lies in the Kilgore Trout novel Billy reads in the hospital after the war: the main action of the story is centered around the

kidnapping of two Earthlings who are then put on display on the planet Zircon-212.¹⁹ Likewise, Josh Simpson asserts that Billy's experiences on Tralfamadore "must be approached as an escape mechanism grounded in mental instability but – and this is key – fueled by Troutean science fiction."²⁰ As does Billy's time travel, Tralfamadore provides numerous examples of Bergsonian connectivity played out on this grandiose scale. In the delousing station in the POW camp, for example, an overt line is drawn between the experience Billy is undergoing at this moment and his experience on Tralfamadore: "Billy did as he was told, took off his clothes. That was the first thing they told him to do on Tralfamadore, too."²¹ Deep in the coma, Billy is dipping into his memory, trawling the sea of his duration, and assembling Tralfamadore from what he finds there.

The escape Tralfamadore offers, as a concept, is more involved than a simple location, as of course the planet exists only in Billy's mind. Location, in fact, has very little to do with the kind of absolution that Billy Pilgrim seeks: the beauty of the amnesty which Tralfamadore provides lies in its ability to dismantle linear time and the implied positing of the idea of free will as a quaint and rather silly human notion. In the sort of timeline the Tralfamadoreans present, a nod to Calvinist determinism, actions are determined, moments are structured, humanity and the world and every living thing in the universe are trapped, as bugs, "in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*."²² Viewed in this way, Billy survives the war because he was meant to, he was chosen, and this alleviates some of the guilt and bewilderment he feels at having been left alive in the midst of so much death – not once, but twice. Tralfamadore's simultaneously lonely and comforting view of time proposes that every moment is always occurring, has always occurred, and will always occur, just as it is meant to, and can be viewed at will, one at a time or all at once. This kind of bird's-eye view of time, the ability to go back and revisit the past or jump ahead to the future, is essentially what the Tralfamadoreans are offering in this dangerously forgiving temporality. The linear time frame on which Bergson insists consciousness and freedom are reliant is dismissed by the Tralfamadorean guide at the zoo as something akin to strange and unusual torture:

But among them was this poor Earthling, and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe . . . He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe . . . All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe. He didn't know he was on a flatcar, didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation.²³

If Billy were to subscribe to the Tralfamadorean temporality, he would be able to look in all directions, in front or behind him, to see many moments at once and

recognise that death is simply one moment among many. Herein lies the most appealing, the most seductive of Tralfamadore's offerings: the eradication of death as an irreversible and frightening event. The jewel – though ultimately, the tragic flaw – of the Tralfamadorian view of time is “the principal virtue of absorbing death and ostensibly cushioning Billy from any further experiences of horror.”²⁴ After all, on Tralfamadore there is no such thing as death – if all time happens at once, that most deeply sad, solitary, and necessary aspect of human temporality ceases to exist. On Tralfamadore, says Billy, “when a person dies he only *appears* to die,” and so it is not the permanent, irrevocable, and inevitable situation humans believe it to be. Rather, death, simply stated, means “the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments.”²⁵ For Billy Pilgrim, haunted by the war, this is release.

Billy's own death is not truly death, then, with any degree of finality. He experiences his beginning and his end numerous times over the course of his time travels, an experience explained by the Tralfamadorians' view of temporality, and he knows better than to fear a short period surrounded by “violet light and a hum.”²⁶ The removal of death as a finality imposes on Billy the necessity of enduring his lot forever, because he is so much a product of his delusions. Without the linear creation of time with death as its endpoint, Billy is doomed to what Bergson would call “an eternity of death.”²⁷ To Bergson, human consciousness exists in time, and our selves are created through the accumulation of moments over time, so that by removing himself from the temporal flow Billy has, in effect, made of himself a thing. He is no longer conscious in the Bergsonian sense; unlike normal, healthy human consciousness, Billy can move and is moved back and forth through time in the same way an object is moved about a room. He no longer changes, and his immersion in this new temporality means that Billy must spend his eternity ceaselessly reliving each moment of his life, at random, without any hope of the ultimate relief of death. He skips into and out of death as he does any other scene in his life – his birth, his wedding, every banal and insignificant argument and interaction he has ever had is waiting to be passed through again and again, in perpetuity. Billy harbours no illusions about his chances for escape from this, his constructed psychological shelter; the whole point of Tralfamadore in the first place was to avoid old age, death, and horror. The irony is, of course, that the Tralfamadorian timeframe will force him to relive precisely those moments of horror and death it was created to shelter him from. Billy is unable to choose the moments to which he travels, so he is as likely to be acting in a scene in the POW camp as the scene on his wedding night; his time-jumping makes no distinctions in type. Billy endures this endless, gainless, painful and impotent perambulation through the best and worst moments of his life; there

is no thought of escape, were such a thing possible. Knowing, all the time, that “among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future,”²⁸ he carries on, facing an eternity of death.

Faced with two unappealing options – life or death – Billy opts for a third, and creates an alternate reality in which he is not free, and therefore not responsible. Speaking to Billy’s creation of Tralfamadore, Robert Uphaus suggests that it is characteristic of Vonnegut’s oeuvre to pit the inevitability of death against the ability of the imagination to supersede it.²⁹ Tralfamadore is the escape Billy imagines in order to shield himself from more death and destruction, the war having exhausted his “horror-quotient,” as Uphaus puts it, with Billy finally having reached his breaking point during the plane crash. The anguish of acknowledging his imminent death and the permanence of all the deaths he witnessed in Dresden is intolerable, the anguish of living is intolerable, suicide is never even considered. Tralfamadore and its enabling time travel is the solution Billy’s battered brain is forced to invent.

Billy’s Location in Time

Billy Pilgrim’s travels in time are thus of a psychological nature rather than actual, physical movement in time and space. As Martin Coleman notes, “Vonnegut gives no account of Billy surprising the other characters by appearing out of thin air.”³⁰ Clearly, then, Billy’s body does not leave the time and space it occupied before a jump, hence the time travel in which Billy engages must be a purely cerebral experience. Though Stanley Schatt demurs that “the novel is so constructed that one cannot determine whether or not what Billy sees is real,”³¹ many critics in addition to Coleman have reached the conclusion that Billy does not, in actuality, travel through time.³²

Narratively, Billy first comes unstuck in 1944, lost behind enemy lines in a German winter. He is cold and improperly clothed, pitifully unprepared for life as a soldier, and in a particularly unhappy moment, when Billy has lost all hope, his “attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light.”³³ Billy experiences memories from pre-birth, early childhood, a 1965 visit to his mother in her old-age home, a 1958 Little League game with his son, a New Year’s party ringing in 1961, and so on. This range of motion could potentially be explained by claiming that Billy began time travelling during the war, maintaining an external, physical, linear path while continuing to move back and forth through his life, gaining greater mobility as his years increased. However, a more compelling argument is that Billy’s time travel takes place while he is in a coma in the hospital following the plane crash, in 1967. In this scene Billy is heard to be mumbling phrases from the war: “‘You guys go on

without me,' said Billy Pilgrim deliriously."³⁴ This phrase is first uttered much earlier, on page 47, in response to Roland Weary shaking Billy back into 1944 after his first slip through time, and again just before that as Billy's response to being "cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent."³⁵ The fact that Billy, lying in his hospital bed in late 1967, utters phrases from a scene that has already been introduced in the novel, and which involves time travel, rather than from some new and unknown occurrence, makes it possible to read his time travel as a product of his coma which continues to resonate until the beginning of the novel, when Billy is in his basement in Ilium. This means, then, that the entire novel, with the exception of the passages which deal with Billy post-crash, consists of flashbacks, and the time travel within them of embedded and delusory memory-links. Thus the Billy-as-soldier introduced on page 30 does not exist in 1944, but in the memories of the Billy in a coma in 1967, and his time travels indicate the intrusion of other memories onto the memory of the war. With this reading, the text becomes a meandering, stream-of-consciousness journey through the memories of a shell-shocked war veteran with an extremely tenuous grip on reality.

The presupposition that Billy's time travel is psychological rather than physical facilitates a Bergsonian reading. If his temporal movements are cerebral and not physical, the idea that Billy is being shunted about from moment to moment by external forces, and that he has no control over when he goes or where he ends up, loses some of its persuasiveness. Billy is certainly the "listless plaything of enormous forces,"³⁶ but they are not universal, they are personal: they are the forces of his own memory. If Billy's conscious attention is moved by his memories, his time travel takes on a more logical sense of connectivity: his memories are triggered by similarities in theme, aesthetic, tone, and the innumerable other tiny indefinable factors that serve to connect one memory to another. I posit that what we are witnessing in Billy's time travel is a dramatization of Bergsonian duration, taken to an illogical and ultimately, for Billy's conscious freedom, calamitous extreme.

Considerable textual evidence exists to support the theory that Billy's travel is triggered by mnemonic connections in his own mind. The repetition of phrases and the specific combinations of words and images connect memories to one another: for example, the trains on the way to the POW camp are exceedingly cramped and crowded, and the men are cold, so in order to sleep they take it in turns to lie on the floor and curl together, "nestled like spoons."³⁷ Billy later refers to his wife and himself, in bed on the night of their daughter's wedding and the night that he is kidnapped by Tralfamadorians, as being "nestled like spoons,"³⁸ and the use of the same phrasing argues that the "nestling" is what

triggered the travel in the first place. The self Billy is while travelling at this particular moment associates a number of situations with the phrase “nestled like spoons” and these connections are so strong, and his memories so vivid, that he believes himself to be travelling in time. Jerome Klinkowitz concurs that Vonnegut’s use of these connected phrases creates meaning “in an independent space between the two [phrases]. This is the realm of spontaneous appreciation Vonnegut seeks to achieve, which is the same simultaneity of comprehension that seems so unattainable when described in Tralfamadorian terms.”³⁹ Billy’s entire world, with this reading, becomes confined to what occurs within his own duration. With the exceptions of the scenes in New York and after, the entire book is composed of a series of recollections and flashbacks, and the temporality is determined by the simultaneity of comprehension within Billy Pilgrim’s own mind.

In the midst of the terrors of war, lost and helpless and dying of cold behind enemy lines during a war for which he is tragically unprepared, Billy allows his mind to take him somewhere else. Billy’s location becomes a matter of time, unbound by the determinism of a physical presence in space. In the way that multiple personalities can be developed in response to situations of extreme stress, Billy Pilgrim grants himself the ability to immerse himself so completely in his memories that he can actually escape into them. In his desperation, Billy attempts to defy the Bergsonian maxim which disallows temporal regression by creating a temporality with a different set of rules into which he can escape. However, this escape proves to be incomplete: the triggering of memories by other memories indicates that their connection to one another holds strong regardless of where he is in his mind. He can escape into his duration, but he cannot escape duration itself. His memories are still subjected to one another’s influence, and Billy is subjected to the accumulated effect of all his years. He is caught weeping at inopportune moments on several occasions; he falls asleep on his patients and on awakening finds he has spent so much time wandering the twisted hallways of his memories that he can remember neither where nor when he is; most importantly, Billy himself suspects that something is amiss when he is completely undone by the barbershop quartet singing at his wedding anniversary: “He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was.”⁴⁰ The hint of a secret indicates that deep down, Billy intuits the degree to which his sanity has gotten away from him.

Bergson claims that each state of being is forever linked to the moment it is felt. The precise instant a sensation is apprehended is as much a part of the construction of the state as the emotion itself. The application of Bergsonian philosophy opens

the narrative to the possibility that Billy is not just roaming through his memories, he is actually revisiting each state of being in the moment at which it occurred. Bergsonism allows the consideration that Billy is, in a manner of speaking, actually travelling in time: since each memory is indelibly connected to its moment of conception, in order to return to the memory, he must return to the moment. He may continue to age normally and experience life, but his mind is trapped in the labyrinthine bramble of a lifetime of interrelated experience, and to this end he could be said to actually travel through time. In effect, he disassembles duration – spatialises it, Bergson would say – and reconstructs it in no particular order, jumping from one moment in time to another, without the blending and blurring of edges that characterises duration as an aspect of time. Billy is, of course, a human being, and as such is subject to the same sunset arc and will eventually succumb to the same end as every other living thing. His fate, far from being an arid question of philosophy, is therefore concerned with questions of human perception and subjectivity. Billy is lost in the fog of his duration: he believes himself to be shuffled about at random, revisiting various states at their moments of conception, and thus he loses the linear progression of states that allow for human freedom. Removed from the linear propulsion of his consciousness-in-time, Billy's duration stagnates. Coleman says that because of Billy's "insensibility to temporal relations, the past is lost to him; he is blind to the present, and the future is wholly inscrutable, bringing good fortune or pain unaccountably and mysteriously."⁴¹

The possibility of development or growth over time, in particular, is sacrificed, not only by Vonnegut's use of time travel but also by his enclosure of the third-person action of the book within the first-person bookend chapters. In the introductory chapter he announces that the book "begins like this: *Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.* It ends like this: *Poo-tee-weet?*"⁴² By being introduced in this manner, the succeeding narrative is essentially encapsulated in a time-bubble where the end of the book is embedded in its beginning. This joining of start and finish, like the touching of thumb and forefinger, creates a circle in which all the action of the book is contained and the rules of linear time as normally understood are suspended. The very act of mentioning the last sentence in conjunction with the first means that every moment leading up to that last sentence is framed by and coloured with the awareness of that final line. Structurally, this is representative of Billy Pilgrim's personal timeline: in his coma, he shelters himself in his memories, which, like the novel's narrative, are closed and circuitous, rather than linear and therefore conscious and free.

Billy's Denial of Time

Billy's denial of experience, his shutting down in the face of the admittedly overwhelming horrors of war and death, is quite within the realm of sympathy. The thought of an escape from a Russian winter in a prisoner-of-war camp is not without its merits, but Billy's serenity comes at the price of his freedom. He floats in a "dream-like state devoid of temporal roots, significant experience, and meaning. He is calm and untroubled, but isolated from his own experience," including his own death.⁴³ As Vonnegut has shown through his capricious use of the phrase "so it goes," death is a fundamental theme of not only this novel, or of existential literature, but of all existence. Billy's disavowal of linear time means that he rejects the one thing common to all living things, the one thing that connects everything and everyone. By denying death, Billy removes himself completely from the realm of the human; in his desire to be eternal, he loses the universal. He avoids death by dismantling linear temporality, to which all humans are subject and on which conscious freedom depends, and thus expels himself from humanity. He becomes a citizen of his own memories, an internal migrant, thereby missing the one thing that makes life worthwhile.

In his essay on time travel in literature, Daniel Cordle states that Vonnegut chooses a non-linear temporality in order to force the reader to "reconsider the different sorts of meanings that are associated with change over time,"⁴⁴ rather than dismissing it as meaningless. I argue that Billy's situation in the bubble of his duration strips his life of meaning altogether, and that his spatialization of the heterogeneity of duration undermines the possibility of the meaning inherent in change over time. In a linear view of time, one event follows another. This means, for all practical purposes and for the sake of argument here, that each occurrence has an effect on what happens next, and that situations have a more or less traceable lineage backwards – though not forwards – through time. In a Bergsonian view, at least, this is certainly the case. In addition to providing us with our near-absolute freedom – we create ourselves as we go, and yet the self is not merely an accumulation of the past because in the perpetual flow of linear time, existence is continual creation, so there is always room for the unforeseen – a linear time frame also allows for events to have meaning, to be caused by or to cause another event, and to gain relevance through the causal relationship. Without this type of temporality, there is no longer any such thing as a system of cause-and-effect, because for events to exercise influence on one another, they must follow one another in a sequence. As Cordle notes with a smirk: "the hackneyed demand that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end is surely founded on the assumption that it is in a traditional sequencing of events that meaning resides."⁴⁵

I would argue that Cordle is conflating the linear sequencing of events in hindsight with the psychological determinism that Bergson refutes, the view that claims events exist in time to be encountered when appropriate. For Billy Pilgrim, and for human beings in general, this demand is not hackneyed in the least: the meaning inherent in chronology is very real. Cordle, paraphrasing the American evolutionary biologist and paleontologist Steven Jay Gould, justifies his dismissal through the comparison of the human desire for linear progression in novels with the desire to believe that evolution itself is likewise linear and teleological. He argues that the notion that there is a clear path, a direct line from the primordial sludge to the ascension of humanity, and that humanity itself is the ultimate goal of evolution, contributes a great deal to our ability to ascribe meaning and purpose to our existence.⁴⁶ For Henri Bergson, however, the appearance of following a distinct path is only a retrospective phenomenon, because to assume that there are two or more possible paths and that one of these is chosen is to create the future before it happens. For this path-theory to work, the future must be constructed, whole and waiting just out of sight, for us to come across at the designated point in time. Bergson disagrees with this on a fundamental level, believing that if time is structured in this manner, human freedom becomes a parody. The future is not chosen, Bergson says, but created. This, of course, is also the fault with the Tralfamadorian view of human temporality: it is dependent on their notion that all moments are structured at all times, which directly conflicts with Bergsonian notions of consciousness and freedom. The illustration of a human strapped to a flatcar is theoretically feasible only when predicated on the expectation that time does not move, humans do: as with Bergson's refutation of the path theory, it means that every moment already exists, and we have the misfortune of being able to apprehend only one moment at a time, in a set order. This entails a mathematical representation of time as space: a depiction of clock-time, rather than the time of consciousness. To Bergson, this is a fallacious illustration because, as he says, humans create time in the processing of memories and their accumulation as past. The freedom inherent in a linear time frame is reliant on the possibility of change, on the existence of space for the unforeseen.

The Tralfamadorian view of time is in fact a denial of time, if time is the construction of change, possibility, growth, and interaction as it is defined in the Bergsonian sense. Time on Tralfamadore, as a mathematical construction, ignores the temporal flux and movement that characterises the nature of time to human beings. This is a timeframe invented by Billy Pilgrim, which frees him from the responsibilities of freedom and continual creation: he dismantles his consciousness, his duration, removes it from the linear flow of time on which freedom depends, and reconstructs it concretely. He dismantles time itself, as it is defined by each

moment's connection to a particular and unique state of being: by revisiting them in their original states, without learning or changing at all, he is in effect rearranging time through his shuffling of memory. The time Billy spends reliving old memories is not accumulative, but rather ceaselessly repetitive: "He found himself engaged again, word for word, gesture for gesture, in the argument with his daughter with which this tale began."⁴⁷ In adopting the Tralfamadorian view, Billy removes any chance to learn and grow and change in the world: he is condemned to re-experience moments "without the possibility of change, since his knowledge of the future is useless in terms of its application to the present."⁴⁸ Though Coleman applies the theories of John Dewey (which share a number of ideas with Bergsonism), he nonetheless agrees that Billy "is ignorant of the meaning of his experiences, that is, how his experiences are related."⁴⁹ Rather than being able to add memories, to allow the passage of time to give meaning to the events of the past and shape his reactions in the future, he has instead, in his desire to escape the horrors of the war, trapped himself in a fishbowl of shifting temporality that at any moment could deposit him right back into the midst of the very thing he is trying to escape.

Edelstein argues that the "space-travel to Tralfamadore and what Billy Pilgrim learns there about time provide him with a framework in which he can make peace with both the horrors of his past and the horrors of his impending old age, and in which his entire life has meaning".⁵⁰ Agreeing, Philip M. Rubens writes of the "tyranny of linear time" and claims that "mankind [is] trapped in a linear, deterministic universe."⁵¹ I argue the contrary: the framework Billy Pilgrim assembles scrubs his life of meaning, placing him within a circle of time around the inside of which he shuffles at random. It removes him from the unifying, humanizing experience of death, turns his living, changing consciousness into a solid, concrete thing, and renders him unfree. He cannot make peace with his impending old age, because for Billy, it is not impending. It is there, existent and whole, for him to visit at random and potentially inopportune moments rather than an imminent and unknown stage in his future. Likewise the horrors of war: he is liable to be thrown at any moment back into the horrors of Dresden, and as such never has the time and distance that would enable him to heal. On a long enough timeline, it is safe to assume that Billy will have to patronise all his moments at one point or another, helplessly watching himself re-play old conversations without being able to grow, to learn anything new, or to change anything. Rather, he is trapped forever in the endless repetition of his memories, and "an ego which does not change, does not endure."⁵² Billy ends up rooted not into the moment of the firestorm itself, but those that immediately follow: those moments of realization and recognition, of increasing awareness of the scale and

scope of what has just been witnessed. Arguably, these are more painful than the moments of the firestorm itself, for which, as Vonnegut says, “He was down in the meat locker . . . The meat locker was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine.”⁵³ The bird call that began the book is the one to end it, closing the circle of time in which the narrative is contained, and trapping Billy Pilgrim forever in that moment of his memory immediately after the firestorm, a moment after the massacre when “everything is supposed to be very quiet . . . and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘Poo-tee-weet?’”⁵⁴ The structure of the book echoes the sealing of Billy’s own consciousness inside a bubble where all moments exist at once, and therefore he is responsible for nothing, and cannot be free. Time may not heal all wounds, but its passage allows for the perspective and reflection that are necessary to the process of recovery. Billy, in his desperation for relief, removes himself from the natural progression of linear time in order to escape the horrors that wound him. In so doing, Billy also denies himself the possibility of healing any of those wounds and negates the conscious freedom inherent in linearity. Wretched in his need to flee the destruction around him, he divorces himself from the world and from humanity and so lives only within the circle of his own memories. “The irony,” as Vonnegut says, “is so great.”⁵⁵

J.A. Martino received her B.A. in English from the University of Ottawa, Canada, in 2004, and her Master’s in English from the University of Otago, New Zealand, in 2008. Her research interests include French existential philosophy and its precursors, American war novels, and literature of the Latin-American Boom. She will begin doctoral studies in 2011.

-
- ¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Dell, 1991), 123.
- ² Vance Ramsey, "From Here to Absurdity: Heller's Catch-22," in *Seven Contemporary Authors*, Thomas Whitbread, ed. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1968), 108.
- ³ Richard Lehan, *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973), 159-60.
- ⁴ David Simmons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 8.
- ⁵ Albert Camus, quoted in Patricia Johnson, "Bergson's *Le Rire*: Game Plan for Camus' *L'Etranger*?" *The French Review* 47.1 (1973): 46.
- ⁶ Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, Andrew Brown, trans. (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 108.
- ⁷ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, F.L. Pogson, trans., 3rd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1913).
- ⁸ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*, (New York: Cornell UP, 2006), 90.
- ⁹ Bergson's notions of "the self" are vastly more complex than this singular representation of what he refers to as the "true self". However, for the sake of this paper it is not necessary to delineate the variegated aspects of selfhood, merely to note that it is present in, and subject to, the passage of time.
- ¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Arthur Mitchell, trans. (London: Macmillan, 1922), 5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 7.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 6.
- ¹³ For further reading on the psychology of Billy Pilgrim and its relationship to time travel and Tralfamadore, see Suzanne Veas-Gulani, "Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to *Slaughterhouse-Five*" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44.2 (2003) 175-84; and Lawrence Broer, *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (U Alabama P, 1994).
- ¹⁴ Ihab Hassan, "The Existential Novel," *Massachusetts Review* 3.4 (1962), 796.
- ¹⁵ Arnold Edelstein, "Slaughterhouse-Five: Time Out of Joint," *College Literature* 1.2 (1978), 128-39.
- ¹⁶ Vonnegut, 25.
- ¹⁷ Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl, "Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The Requirements of Chaos," in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, Robert Merrill, ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), 142-53.
- ¹⁸ Vonnegut, 98.
- ¹⁹ Edelstein, 130.
- ²⁰ Josh Simpson, "'The Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* or 'Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World': Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45.3 (2004), 267.
- ²¹ Vonnegut, 83.
- ²² *Ibid*, 77 (his italics).
- ²³ *Ibid*, 115.
- ²⁴ Roger W Uphaus, "Expected Meaning in Vonnegut's Dead-End Fiction," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 8.2 (1975): 169.
- ²⁵ Vonnegut, 26-7 (his italics).
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 43.
- ²⁷ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, T. E. Hulme, trans. (London: Macmillan, 1913), 51.
- ²⁸ Vonnegut, 60.
- ²⁹ Uphaus, 166.
- ³⁰ Martin Coleman, "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 44.4 (2008): 685.
- ³¹ Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 65.
- ³² See also Marc Leeds and Peter J. Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); Harold Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009).
- ³³ Vonnegut, 43.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 184.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 34.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 164.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 70.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 72.
- ³⁹ Jerome Klinkowitz, *Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel and the World*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 79.
- ⁴⁰ Vonnegut, 173.
- ⁴¹ Coleman, 688.
- ⁴² Vonnegut, 22.
- ⁴³ Coleman, 690.
- ⁴⁴ Daniel Cordle, "Changing of the Old Guard: Time Travel and Literary Technique in the work of Kurt Vonnegut," *Yearbook of English Studies* 30 (2000): 170.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 166.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 170.
- ⁴⁷ Vonnegut, 165.

⁴⁸ Sharon Sieber, "Unstuck in Time: Simultaneity as a Foundation for Vonnegut's Chrono-Synclastic Infundibula and other Nonlinear Time Structures," in *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations*, Marc Leeds and Peter J. Reed, eds. (Greenwood Press: Connecticut, 2000), 148.

⁴⁹ Coleman, 688.

⁵⁰ Edelstein, 132.

⁵¹ Philip M Rubens, "Nothing's Ever Final: Vonnegut's Concept of Time," *College Literature* 6.1 (1979): 65.

⁵² Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 4.

⁵³ Vonnegut, 177.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 5 (his italics).